

Change and Continuity

Reforms and Legacy of the Whitlam Government

Synopsis: The post-WWII period oversaw the process of regionalism, where multilateral relations were rapidly established between neighbouring countries. This essay assesses the Whitlam government's significance as a central turning point for Australia's deepening relationship with the Asia-Pacific. It accounts for changes and continuities brought by this era in Australia's regional engagement.

"Prime Minister Whitlam has left, but the spirit of a great man will always inspire us... We will unite all those who love multicultural and multi-ethnic communities."

- Zhou Jian, Executive Vice President of the ACPPRC

Economic interests and national security have long driven and shaped Australia's international relationships.¹ Following the extensive period of disengagement in foreign relations by the Coalition government after WWII, succeeding governments have aimed to integrate these national interests to advance Australia.² The Whitlam government (1972-1975), seeking to consolidate "regional security"³ in Asia-Pacific, drastically changed Australia's relationship with key nations in the region and laid the foundation for successive governments to expand the economy during "new regionalism"⁴. Although the political crisis and subsequent Dismissal⁵ of 1975 often overshadow important themes and exceptional achievements in Whitlam's public life,

¹ Samuel M. Makinda, "National Interests and Global Norms in Australia's Policies towards the Asia-Pacific." (Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs, 2014) pp. 25

² Ross Garnaut, "Australia's Asia-Pacific Journey." (Australian Institute of Policy and Science, 1992) pp. 359

³ Regional security: A theory where geographical adjacency of neighbouring nations increase security interactions and tend to cluster together.

⁴ New regionalism: A period of global economic integration between states and nonstates within a geographical region.

⁵ The Dismissal: A controversial event in Australia's political history where Governor-General Kerr dismissed Gough Whitlam as the prime minister in 1975.

his enduring legacy established Australia's current position in the Asia-Pacific region. These significant changes in global outlook brought by the Whitlam government are evident through his recognition of China, which trailblazed Australia-Asia relations.⁶ Moreover, Whitlam's focus towards expanding foreign policies is evident in the economic setting as his multiple international treaties opened the Australian economy to the Pacific.⁷ To further integrate Australia into the Asia-Pacific region, Whitlam abolished the White Australia Policy, making the 1972 government a turning point in achieving multiculturalism in Australia.⁸ Despite these radical changes being controversial at that time, the legacies of the Whitlam government prevail in both our political and socio-economic landscape.

Understanding the political context leading to the 1972 election is critical for recognising Australia's development of an independent international outlook within the Asia-Pacific region during the Whitlam era. Historically, Australia has feared Asia and largely depended on its "great and powerful friends"⁹ for protection. This is shown by our reliance on the British Empire during the first part of the twentieth century, and then our gradual shift towards a closer alliance with the United States as the key to security after the onset of the Pacific War in December 1941.¹⁰ The signing of the ANZUS treaty¹¹ in 1957 was a major milestone in solidifying this relationship and established the basis of Australia's strategy of "forward defence", as stated by Menzies that "the

⁶ "1971: Gough Whitlam Visits China — Whitlam Institute." *Whitlam Institute*. Accessed 10 July 2023. <https://www.whitlam.org/publications/1971-visit-to-china>.

⁷ "Whitlam Turned Focus on to Asia." *The Age*. Accessed 10 July, 2023. <https://www.theage.com.au/national/whitlam-turned-focus-on-to-asia-20051111-ge17vk.html>.

⁸ "A Multicultural Australia," *Whitlam Institute*. Accessed 10 July, 2023. <https://www.whitlam.org/whitlam-legacy-a-multicultural-australia>.

⁹ "Transcript 1009," *Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet*. Accessed 13 July, 2023. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-1009>

¹⁰ Derek McDougall, "Australia and Asia-Pacific Security Regionalism: From Hawke and Keating to Howard," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 23 (2001): 83

¹¹ ANZUS treaty: a collective agreement to protect the security of the Pacifics between Australia, the US and New Zealand in 1951.

central themes of Australian foreign policy should be support and loyalty to the great protectors.”¹² This strategy oversaw Australia entering conflicts alongside the US in both the Korean and Vietnam War, as well as Britain in the Malayan Emergency of the 1950s.¹³ However, the British withdrawal from “east of Suez” in the late 1960s and America’s changing position in the Vietnam War by retreating, as declared by the Guam Doctrine, left a security vacuum in the Asia-Pacific region. Therefore, to be consistent with these changes, Australia’s defence moved in the direction of independence, and the need to establish “regional security” within the Asia-Pacific region became a priority in the 1970s.¹⁴ It was under these principles to improve national security that propelled the Whitlam government into a period of reforms in foreign policy, where they denounced the “xenophobic belief that Australia was best defended from Asia” in the “forward defence” strategy and strived to find Australia’s “security in Asia, not to seek security from Asia.”¹⁵ Hence, the Whitlam era was driven by national interest and maintaining security in the Asia-Pacific region to forge tighter relations with neighbouring countries.

One of the Whitlam government’s most significant advances towards forming closer ties with the Asia-Pacific region was establishing bilateral agreements with China. Often seen by historians as an internationalist,¹⁶ Gough Whitlam’s pre-electoral 1971 visit to China was then a highly controversial action amidst Cold War tensions.¹⁷ However, the visit was a major political success

¹² Major Jeremy Brown, “An Analysis of Australian Defence Policy from 1901 to Present,” *Security Nexus Research* (2020): 3

¹³ D. McDougall, op. cit., 83

¹⁴ J. Brown, op. cit., 3

¹⁵ “Gough’s Remaking of Foreign Policy,” *The Strategist*. Accessed 13 July, 2023.

<https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/goughs-remaking-of-foreign-policy/>

¹⁶ Michael Kirby AC CMG, “Whitlam as Internationalist: A Centenary Reflection,” *Melbourne University Law Review* 39:850(2016): 876

¹⁷ “The 1971 meeting that defined the relationship with China for decades,” *Financial Review*. Accessed 24 August, 2023.

as expressed by Dr Stephen FitzGerald, who was part of the delegation brought by Whitlam, “it not only paved the way for diplomatic relations” between the future governments but for the public who lacked knowledge on Asia: “it... opened the way to public support for engagement with Asia on a new basis of equality and mutual respect.”¹⁸ This reappraisal of Australia’s relationship with China displayed the regionalism of Whitlam’s approach, founded upon the national interest of security, where he foresaw “that Australia needed a relationship with Asia based on acceptance of it as our enduring neighbourhood.”¹⁹ His political feat became more impressive when, two days after his visit, Kissinger, the US National Security Adviser, secretly visited Beijing to lay the groundwork for Nixon’s visit to China. This demonstrates how Whitlam’s normalisation of political involvement towards China influenced other Western countries to establish similar communications with China during the Cold War.²⁰ After the Whitlam era, his regional approach continued to be implemented by successive Parties, such as the Fraser government. James Curran observed that Malcolm Fraser, who declared Gough Whitlam “a ‘Manchurian Candidate’” for visiting China in 1971, took back his word and was found “five years later... proposing a quadrilateral pact with the Chinese....”²¹ In 2022, the current Prime Minister Anthony Albanese commemorated Whitlam’s establishment of diplomatic relations with China, claiming that his “principles guide us still as we seek to stabilise the relationship and build a better future.”²² This continuation between Australia and China’s

<https://www.afr.com/world/asia/the-1971-meeting-that-defined-the-relationship-with-china-for-decades-20210630-p585ny>

¹⁸ “1971: Gough Whitlam visits China,” *Whitlam Institute*. Accessed 14 July, 2023.

<https://www.whitlam.org/publications/1971-visit-to-china>

¹⁹ “Whitlam’s visit decisive in our view of China, and ourselves,” *Financial Review*. Accessed 14 July 2023.

<https://www.afr.com/world/asia/whitlam-s-visit-decisive-in-our-view-of-china-and-ourselves-20210629-p585dd>

²⁰ “Whitlam in China 1971,” *The Greens Western Australia*. Accessed 24 August 2023.

<https://greens.org.au/wa/magazine/whitlam-china-1971>

²¹ “How has Australia dealt with China in the past and what does this mean for today?” *ABC News*. Accessed 14 July, 2023. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-09-07/australia-china-relations-past/101382128>

²² “Principles behind Whitlam’s China vision still drive us,” *Australian Embassy China*. Accessed 15 July 2023. <https://china.embassy.gov.au/bjng/pm-oped-50th-anniversary.html>

diplomacy, though frequently marked by tensions and conflicting values, has remained strong since the Whitlam government as both parties recognise their shared national interests. Thus, Whitlam's historic visit to China swiftly changed Australia's position in the world and security in the region, with the significance of this relationship continuing to influence foreign outlook today.

Gough Whitlam further strengthened Australia's position in the Asia-Pacific region by continuing to consolidate Australia's economy with its regional neighbours, particularly regarding Japan and Indonesia. Prior to the 1970s, Japan was already a crucial export market for Australia. This trend continued under the Whitlam government, where Japan comprised 29% of all exports, becoming Australia's largest trading partner and since then, maintained that position for 26 years.²³ Seeking to deepen this tie to override the "acute memories" of WWII and the White Australia Policy, Whitlam endeavoured to draft a treaty symbolising cooperation and goodwill between the two countries, stating that he "believe[s] the Treaty of Nara will be seen as one of the historic treaties which Australia will have entered into."²⁴ Although rejected by the Japanese officials, the subsequent Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser continued with this vision, with both parties signing the treaty in 1976. This was the first treaty of friendship signed between Australia and any country and extended most-favoured-nation status to all commercial dealings within both countries' economies, effectively expanding Australia's position towards the Northwest Pacific.²⁵ Similar gestures of friendship were also extended to Indonesia, with President Soeharto and Whitlam building a 'genuine' relationship and negotiating Australian

²³ "Australia and Japan," Australian Embassy Tokyo. Accessed 19 July, 2023.

<https://japan.embassy.gov.au/tkyo/bilateral-relations.html>

²⁴ "Transcript 3066," *Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet*. Accessed 19 July, 2023.

<https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-3066>

²⁵ Peter Drysdale, "Did the NARA Treaty make a difference?" *Australian National University*. Accessed 20 July, 2023. <https://researchprofiles.anu.edu.au/en/publications/did-the-nara-treaty-make-a-difference>

economic assistance to “continue after the end of the current program.”²⁶ The closer ties between the two countries are highlighted through the aggregate Australia-Indonesia trade, which, though small, has doubled from 1972 to 1973.²⁷ However, in the foreground, Whitlam’s handling of relations towards Indonesia was criticised over the issue of East Timor’s independence, where Historian Craig Stockings describes Indonesia’s “desire for incorporation was considered more important in 1974–75 than the aspirations of the local population”.²⁸ This displays that Australia had a strong strategic preference towards Indonesia, partially accounting for the reason towards the lack of intervention by subsequent governments during Indonesia’s annexation of East Timor until 1999. Despite the controversies surrounding Whitlam’s approach to Indonesia, his numerous economic expansions facilitated Australia’s engagement in “new regionalism” in the form of APEC, an inter-governmental forum in the Asia-Pacific region later founded by Prime Minister Bob Hawke, as Japan and Indonesia both became integral members.²⁹ Overall, the Whitlam government was crucial in consolidating economic relations with Australia’s major partners, leading the nation to be commercially connected with the Asia-Pacific region.

Gough Whitlam’s progressive vision of amalgamating Australia into the Asia-Pacific region followed him to the last few months of his office, where his official denouncement of the White Australia Policy through ratifying the Racial Discrimination Act 1975 marked the beginning of multiculturalism in Australia. Arising during the late 19th century, the migration of Chinese

²⁶ “26 Record of Meeting Between Whitlam and Soeharto,” *Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade*. Accessed 20 July, 2023.

<https://www.dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/historical-documents/Pages/volume-20/26-record-of-meeting-between-whitlam-and-soeharto>

²⁷ Hal Hill, “Australia and Indonesia: Challenges and Opportunities in a “Small” Economic Relationship,” *ASEAN Economic Bulletin*. 6:3 (1990): 285

²⁸ “Fire, Ash and Official Secrecy,” *Inside Story*. Accessed 23 July, 2023.

<https://insidestory.org.au/fire-ash-and-official-secrecy/>

²⁹ “About APEC,” Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation. Accessed 24 August, 2023

<https://www.apec.org/about-us/about-apec>

workers ignited Australia's fears of the perceived existential danger of the East and Southeast Asian peoples to their Eurocentric society, dubbed the 'Yellow Peril.' In response, the White Australia Policy was implemented in 1901, justified by the Western fear that 'yellow hordes' would invade their lands and disrupt Western values. The Pacific Island Labourers Act and Immigration Restriction Act, established in 1901, aimed to construct a homogenous European society against the "Yellow Peril" by forbidding Asia-Pacific migrants from entering Australia. However, the international critique of racism inspired by revulsion against Nazi Germany following WWII and the hostility of emerging Asian nations towards the White Australia policy pressured the government to modify immigration restrictions, instigating major changes to the racist status quo.³⁰ Despite this, "the ethos of 'Australia for the white man' was maintained without serious dissent or demurral" by governments, as proclaimed by Dr Tim Soutphommasane, a race discrimination commissioner.³¹ It was not until the Whitlam era from 1972 that the government attempted to deal with its xenophobic past, initiating attempts to treat Asia-Pacific migrants with equality through ratifying the Racial Discrimination Act 1975. The Whitlam government's aim of promoting cultural diversity is reinforced through his description of Australia as a "multicultural nation,"³² supporting the rhetorics of his Immigration Minister, Al Grassby. This indicates Australia's drift from a Westernised and colonial vision of demography while portraying Whitlam's progressive views from his predecessors on integrating Australia with Asia-Pacific culture through encouraging immigration and multiculturalism. His campaign for multiculturalism in Australia extended to our contemporary society, where around 400,000 migrants were arriving between 2021 and 2022. Asia-Pacific countries such as China

³⁰ Neville Meaney, "The end of 'white Australia' and Australia's changing perceptions of Asia, 1945–1990," *Australian Journal of International Affairs*. 49:2(2008): 179

³¹ "The Whitlam Government and the Racial Discrimination Act," Australian Human Rights Commission. Accessed 24 August, 2023.

<https://humanrights.gov.au/about/news/speeches/whitlam-government-and-racial-discrimination-act>

³² N. Meaney, op. cit., 180

and the Philippines are amongst the largest migrant groups. Therefore, the Racial Discrimination Act 1975 on promoting the cultural diversity of Australia expresses the final efforts of the Whitlam government to integrate and secure Australia's position with the Asia-Pacific region.

By reflecting on the continuity and changes of prominent political eras in Australia, we recognise the importance of our national history. The Whitlam government, whose radical approach successfully altered Australia's international focus towards the Asia-Pacific region, began a new narrative for the political, economic and cultural history of this country. Gough Whitlam's perseverance in establishing international policies benefiting Australia's position in the Asia-Pacific is shown by the diplomatic relations with China and a series of economic campaigns in the Pacifics. His dismantling of the White Australia Policy furthered the Asia-Pacific's acceptance of Australia, where, from the words of Gough Whitlam, by "doing our best to redress past injustice", we can "build a more just and tolerant future." The enduring legacy of the Whitlam era is still present and will "go down in Australian history as fundamental building block of the national identity and national unity we share today."

Annotation

Meaney N. 1995. The end of “white Australia” and Australia’s changing perceptions of Asia, 1945–1990. *Australian Journal of International Affairs*. 49(2):171–189.

doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/10357719508445155>.

This article presented a nuanced view on the development and dismantling of the White Australia Policy clearly and chronologically. I was able to understand how xenophobic views still prevailed although governments made multiple reforms. It is also a highly reliable source, being published in the *Australian Journal of International Affairs*.

McDougall D. 2001. Australia and Asia-Pacific Security Regionalism: From Hawke and Keating to Howard. *Contemporary Southeast Asia*. 23(1):81–100. [accessed 2023 Jul 14].

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This article enhanced my knowledge on Australia’s reasons for regional security and our historical dependency on Britain and the United State for protection. The coherent timeline of the successive governments and their approach to Australia’s security enabled an accurate comprehension into the Whitlam government’s role in instigating changes towards Asia-Pacific.

Whitlam Institute. 1971: Gough Whitlam visits China. Whitlam Institute. [accessed 2023 Jul 25].

<https://www.whitlam.org/publications/1971-visit-to-china>.

The Whitlam Institute has guided my research and provided much essential information on the various political achievements and ventures of Gough Whitlam. The primary sources and quotes from Dr Stephen Fitzgerald explained the significance of Whitlam's visit to China and the details in the negotiation between Whitlam and Zhou Enlai.

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